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ABSTRACT

Acknowledged rape victims are women who have experienced forced sexual intercourse and view their experience as rape. Unacknowledged rape victims have suffered the same experience but do not view it as rape. Acknowledged (N=39) and unacknowledged (N=29) rape victims completed a sexual experiences interview and a rape attitude survey to determine if differences exist in the rape belief systems of the two groups, and to identify factors involved in the rape labelling process. Unacknowledged victims were more likely than acknowledged victims to have known the man, to have been involved in a romantic relationship, and to have experienced greater prior and immediate sexual intimacy. Unacknowledged victims also received fewer threats of bodily harm, experienced less offender violence, and had less severe emotional reactions to their experience. Unacknowledged victims characterized the man involved more positively and were less offended by his behavior than the acknowledged victims. There were no differences in attitudes between the two groups. Findings suggest that there are important situational differences between the experiences of acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims, but few, if any, internal differences between the women. (Author/NRB)

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# THE "UNACKNOWLEDGED" RAPE VICTIM

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Problem

Women who are rape victims can be conceptualized as being composed of two subgroups. "Acknowledged" rape victims are women who have experienced forced sexual intercourse and view their experience as rape. "Unacknowledged" rape victims are women who have suffered the same experience -- forced sexual intercourse -- but who for various reasons do not conceptualize their experience as rape. Failure to view their victimization as rape renders the unacknowledged rape victim, in victimology terminology, a "safe victim." A safe victim is one who is unlikely to implicate the man who raped her to police, acquaintances, or family. An unacknowledged rape victim is also unlikely to utilize community rape resources that may be critical of her understanding and assimilation of the experience.

Weis and Borges (1973) have labeled as "victimization" the process through which a woman, should she ever encounter sexual aggression, is prepared to be a "safe victim." Victimization involves "the societal processes that before, during, and after the event simultaneously render the victim defenseless and even responsible for it. Victimization includes the preparation of the victim for the crime, his or her experiences during the crime and the treatment or responses he or she will encounter as part of the aftermath. If these processes of victimization are successful with regard to rape, the raped woman is a 'legitimate' or 'safe' victim who will not be dangerous to the rapist" (Weis & Borges, 1973, p. 72).

Several writers (e.g. Brownmiller, 1975; Medea & Thompson, 1974; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974; Burt, 1980) have

suggested that rape could be fostered and maintained in American society by a culturally transmitted belief structure supportive of rape that consists of myths about rape, attitudes toward violence, attitudes toward male and female roles, etc. Acceptance of a rape supportive belief system has been postulated by Weis and Borges (1973) to affect the behavior of both men and women. During an aggressive sexual encounter acceptance of a rape supportive belief system by a woman could foster misperception of the experience (e.g., a "nice girl" would not be in this situation; I am responsible for unleashing this man's uncontrollable sex drive; this couldn't be rape because I know this man, he's not a dark alley stranger). If two groups of women had a similar sexual assault experience, differences in the degree of acceptance of a rape supportive belief system could account for why some acknowledge their experience as rape and some do not.

The present study had two goals. The first was to document the existence of "safe" or unacknowledged rape victims. The second goal was to compare acknowledged and unacknowledged victims on rape attitudinal measures and on the situational characteristics of the sexual assaults in an attempt to identify some of the factors that might be involved in the rape labeling process and to determine if the two groups of women differed in their belief system related to rape as victimization theory might suggest.

## Subjects and Procedures

Victims were chosen based on their responses to a Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1978) administered in a random

sampling of classes (see Figure 1). The survey consisted of a series of self-report questions regarding the woman's experience with various degrees of sexual aggression. Subjects for this study all responded "yes" to one or more of the following questions:

--Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he threatened to use physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) if you did not cooperate?

--Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)?

--Have you ever been in a situation where a man obtained sexual acts with you such as anal or oral intercourse when you didn't want to by using threats or physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)?

In addition, all subjects were asked for consent to be contacted further for an interview. Overall, 2016 surveys were administered and 236 women who met the criteria for high victim status were identified. Of these, 68 were interviewed, providing the situational and attitudinal data required for the study. These were divided into acknowledged and unacknowledged groups by their responses to the following question:

--Have you ever been raped?

Of the 68 subjects who responded to one of the survey questions indicating that they had had an experience which would meet the legal definition of rape, 39 also responded "yes" that they had been raped. They were labeled "acknowledged" rape victims while the 29 victims who responded "no" they had not been raped were labeled "unacknowledged" rape victims.

All these subjects were contacted and scheduled for a private 1½ hour interview with a female masters level clinical psychologist. During this interview a 39 item "Sexual Experiences Interview" covering the situational characteristics of the sexual assault (e.g., how well the woman knew the man, their relationship, what happened, where, etc. were answered in either a nine point Likert scale or a yes-no format) was administered along with a 77 item factor analytically constructed "Attitude Survey" designed to assess the degree to which a woman agreed with six attitude clusters that could be considered part of a rape supportive belief system. The items of the attitude survey were found to cluster into five groups from a factor analysis performed as part of another study (Leonard, Oros & Koss, 1980). The sixth factor on which the women's responses were scored was the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1972). The six attitudinal factors on which the women's data were scored were (a higher score would reflect more agreement with the factor in the direction stated):

1) acceptance of sexual aggression as abnormal,
2) liberal view of female sexuality,
3) acceptance of rape myths,
4) relationships as non-game playing,
5) acceptance of aggression as normal,
6) liberal attitude toward women.

## Results

The results of the interview can best be conceptualized in two basic components -- factors related to the situation and factors related to the victim. The attitudinal data will be reported under factors related to the victim. The factors related to the situation will be further organized according to these main conceptual categories: the level of acquaintance of the victim and assailant, the use of force by the assailant with subsequent reactions by the victim, and characteristics of the assailant. Data from questionnaire items related to these categories will be presented.

### Factors Related to the Situation

Level of Acquaintance: The data revealed a trend for unacknowledged victims to be better acquainted with the man involved in the incident ($F(1,52) = 3.63$, $p < .07$, A = 5.12, U = 6.31), and all unacknowledged victims reported knowing the man, while only 59% of the acknowledged victims knew the man ($\chi^2 = 13.36$, df = 1, $p < .0004$). In describing their relationship to the man, more unacknowledged victims reported that he was romantically involved with them ($\chi^2 = 17.8$, df = 7, $p < .02$, A = 30.8%, U = 75.8%) than acknowledged victims. Unacknowledged victims also reported having consented to more sexual intimacy prior to the incident ($F(1,66) = 26.67$, $p < .0001$, A = 1.62, U = 3.38) and on the occasion of the incident ($F(1,66) = 54.7$, $p < .0001$, A = 1.36, U = 3.17) than the acknowledged victims. Thus, there appeared to be major differences in the level of acquaintance between acknowledged and unacknowledged victims and their offenders.

Use of Force: There was a trend for acknowledged victims to report more verbal pressure, such as threats ($\underline{X}^2$ = 3.37, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .07$, A = 87% yes, U = 65.5%) than the unacknowledged victims, and there were more threats of bodily harm reported by the acknowledged victims ($\underline{X}^2$ = 16.48, df = 1, $p < .0001$, A = 17% yes, U = 8%). There were also differences in type of physical force used, with acknowledged victims reporting having been hit or beaten more ($\underline{X}^2$ = 7.65, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .006$, A = 34.2% yes, U = 3.4%) and the assailant as having shown a weapon more often ($\underline{X}^2$ = 6.03, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .02$, A = 23.7% yes, U = 0%) than the unacknowledged victims. The acknowledged victims also reported a trend to have experienced choking more than the unacknowledged victims ($\underline{X}^2$ = 3.28, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .08$, A = 15.8% yes, U = 0%). Overall, the acknowledged victims rated the man as more violent ($\underline{F}$ (1,66) = 39.0, $\underline{p} < .0005$, A = 7.36, U = 5.83) than did unacknowledged victims.

The use of greater force by the acknowledged victims' assailant is also reflected in their reactions, in which more acknowledged victims cried ($\underline{X}^2$ = 9.55, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .003$, A = 33.3% yes, U = 0%) and screamed ($\underline{X}^2$ = 3.99, df = 1, $\underline{p} < .05$, A = 18.4% yes, U = 0%) than unacknowledged victims. Acknowledged victims reported making it more clear that they did not desire intercourse ($\underline{F}(1,66)$ = 13.29, $\underline{p} < .05$, A = 8.31, U = 7.41) and were more offended by the man's behavior ($\underline{F}(1,66)$ = 8.59, $\underline{p} < .02$, A = 8.62, U = 7.89) than the unacknowledged victims. Acknowledged victims also reported more severe and negative emotional reactions and adjustment than the unacknowledged victims. The acknowledged victims reported, at the time of the incident,

more fear ($F(1,65) = 53.96$, $p < .0004$, A = 8.05, U = 6.24), helplessness ($F(1,65) = 25.5$, $p < .002$, A = 8.21, U = 6.97), shock ($F(1,65) = 5.49$, $p < .03$, A = 8.08, U = 6.86), unhappiness ($F(1,65) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, A = 8.47, U = 7.9), and anxiety ($F(1,65) = 33.3$, $p < .02$, A = 7.53, U = 6.1) than the unacknowledged victims. There were also trends for the acknowledged victims to feel less guilt ($F(1,65) = 3.39$, $p < .08$, A = 5.08, U = 6.38) and responsibility ($F(1,65) = 2.8$, $p < .10$, A = 3.97, U = 4.97) and more hatred toward the man ($F(1,65) = 3.65$, $p < .07$, A = 7.29, U = 6.03) than the unacknowledged victims. When reflecting on the incident at the time of the interview, the acknowledged victims continued to feel more shock ($F(1,66) = 4.29$, $p < .05$, A = 5.36, U = 4.0), disgust ($F(1,66) = 6.18$, $p < .02$, A = 6.38, U = 4.79), and hatred toward the man ($F(1,66) = 9.8$, $p < .003$, A = 6.03, U = 3.62) than the unacknowledged victims. There were also trends for the acknowledged victims to feel more helpless ($F(1,66) = 3.04$, $p < .09$, A = 4.18, U = 3.07) and angry toward the man ($F(1,66) = 3.37$, $p < .08$, A = 6.72, U = 5.45), and less responsible ($F(1,66) = 3.41$, $p < .07$, A = 2.87, U = 3.97) than unacknowledged victims. Overall, acknowledged victims reported more of a negative effect of the incidence on their emotional adjustment ($F(1,66) = 4.35$, $p < .05$, A = 3.46, U = 4.41) than did unacknowledged victims. Thus, acknowledged victims appeared to have experienced more force directed against them, with a greater subsequent negative emotional reaction than did unacknowledged victims.

Characteristics of the Assailant: Unacknowledged victims rated the man as having experienced more guilt ($F(1,65) = 3.82$, $p <$

.06, A = 1.92, U = 2.97) than the acknowledged victims. Unacknowledged victims also described the man as better looking ($F(1,63) = 11.09$, $p < .002$, A = 4.69, U = 6.62), more gentle ($F(1,65) = 5.95$, $p < .02$, A = 2.92, U = 4.14), more athletic ($F(1,64) = 6.53$, $p < .02$, A = 4.73, U = 6.28), more sexy ($F(1,64) = 11.74$, $p < .002$, A = 3.38, U = 5.45), more emotionally strong ($F(1,63) = 12.35$, $p < .0009$, A = 3.28, U = 5.28), and more understanding ($F(1,65) = 5.75$, $p < .02$, A = 2.32, U = 3.34) than the acknowledged victims. There were also trends for the unacknowledged victims to rate the man as more suggestible ($F(1,64) = 3.47$, $p < .07$, A = 4.68, U = 5.79), more cultured ($F(1,65) = 2.94$, $p < .10$, A = 2.68, U = 3.66), more tactful ($F(1,65) = 3.26$, $p < .08$, A = 2.97, U = 3.93), more easily hurt ($F(1,64) = 3.93$, $p < .06$, A = 2.7, U = 3.79), and less forceful ($F(1,65) = 3.04$, $p < .09$, A = 7.47, U = 6.62) than the acknowledged victims. Unacknowledged victims were generally more positive in their ratings of the men involved in the incident than the acknowledged victims.

## Factors Related to the Victim

Resistance and Attitude: Acknowledged and unacknowledged victims reported no difference in their levels of resistance, both rated themselves moderately resistive. In addition, there were no differences between the two groups on the six factors of the attitudinal measure.

These data suggest that there appears to be little, if any, differences between the women involved in these rape situations in terms of their acceptance of attitudes supportive of rape. The women's labeling of their situations as rape did

not appear to be made because of internal differences (at least as measured in this study), but rather because of aspects of the situation, such as their relationship to the man and the amount of force he used.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings indicate that there definitely are differences in the situational characteristics of the sexual assaults experienced by a group of women who conceptualize themselves as rape victims compared to women who have had similar experiences but do not consider themselves rape victims. The findings do not suggest that the overall nature of the sexual assaults experienced by the two groups of women differed greatly except in several critical areas. Thus, victims were not found to differ in their age at the time, in whether alcohol or other drugs were used, where the experience took place, or in how strongly they resisted. However, they did differ in the degree of violence they experienced, in whether threats or actual force were used, in the degree and type of acquaintance, in the amount of prior and immediate intimacy, and in the emotional reactions and adjustment to their experience. They also differed in their ratings of the male involved. The portrait that emerged of the rape experienced by women who later became "safe" unacknowledged victims is that it involved a man and woman who were romantically involved, who had shared moderate degrees of sexual intimacy prior to and on the occasion of the assault, and an offender who used a moderate amount of force.

The questionnaire used to tap acceptance of rape supportive beliefs by the two groups of victims revealed no significant

differences. Therefore, the findings seem to suggest that there are important situational differences between the experiences of acknowledged and unacknowledged rape victims, but few, if any, internal differences in the women.

The situational differences found could be viewed as consistent with a victimization model in that they could serve as factors a woman might use to "excuse" the behavior of the offender. Thus, the unacknowledged victim could reason that her experience could not have been rape since she was acquainted with the offender and had experienced prior sexual intimacy with him, and he really only used moderate violence. However, any woman may be as vulnerable to these attributional biases, as there were no attitudinal differences among the two groups of women. What we have found are similar women experiencing qualitatively different rape situations who use factors such as acquaintance and force to label their experiences as rape or not. All women who share these attributional biases may then be future "safe" victims if they make determinations of rape on such factors rather than the simple fact of whether a man obtained sex from them forcibly.

The major contribution of this study has been the development of a strategy to identify women who have experienced sexual assault but who do not conceptualize themselves as rape victims and who, therefore, are unlikely to have been included in previous studies of rape victims that have utilized crisis center or police data to recruit victims. Thus, the study has broadened the base on which knowledge about rape rests. It has shed light on specifics of the situations women have experienced, on the

differences between these situations that some women have labeled rape and others have not, and on the internal differences between these women. It may be fruitful for future research efforts to explore both the characteristics of the males involved in these different situations (those who use force vs. threats, etc.) and to make a more thorough examination of the attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral styles of the women to determine if there are differences among the men or women which would add further clarification of the problem.

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FIGURE 1

**Women's Sexual Experiences Survey**

**Directions**: Have you ever had any of the following experiences? Please circle the appropriate response, yes or no, to each item.

**NOTE**: For purposes of this research *sexual intercourse* is defined as penetration, no matter how slight, of the woman by the man. Ejaculation is not required. Whenever you see the words *sexual intercourse*, please use this definition.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you both wanted to? | 1. Yes No |
| 2. Had a man misinterpret the level of sexual intimacy you desired? | 2. Yes No |
| 3. Been in a situation where a man became so sexually aroused that you felt it was useless to stop him even though you did not want to have sexual intercourse? | 3. Yes No |
| 4. Had sexual intercourse with a man even though you didn't want to because he threatened to end your relationship otherwise? | 4. Yes No |
| 5. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't really want to because you felt pressured by his continual arguments? | 5. Yes No |
| 6. Found out that a man had obtained sexual intercourse with you by saying things he didn't really mean? | 6. Yes No |
| 7. Been in a situation where a man used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you engage in kissing or petting when you didn't want to? | 7. Yes No |
| 8. Been in a situation where a man used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to try to get you to have sexual intercourse with him when you didn't want to, but for various reasons intercourse did not occur? | 8. Yes No |
| 9. Been in a situation where a man tried to get sexual intercourse with you when you didn't want to by threatening to use physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) if you didn't cooperate but for various reasons intercourse did not occur? | 9. Yes No |
| 10. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he threatened to use physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) if you did not cooperate? | 10. Yes No |
| 11. Had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)? | 11. Yes No |
| 12. Been in a situation where a man obtained sexual acts with you such as anal or oral intercourse when you didn't want to by using threats or physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)? | 12. Yes No |
| 13. Have you ever been raped? | 13. Yes No |